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OREGON MAN PLEADS GUILTY IN INTERNATIONAL SEX TOURISM CASE

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Assistant Attorney General Christopher A. Wray of the Criminal Division, U.S. Attorney Karin J. Immergut of the District of Oregon, and Leigh Winchell, Special Agent-in-Charge for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Oregon and Washington, announced today that an Oregon man has pleaded guilty to a charge of producing child pornography.

Lester Christian Weber, 50, of Portland, Oregon, entered the plea today at federal court in Portland to one count of production of child pornography, in violation of 18 U.S.C. §§ 2251(c)(1) and 2251(2)(b). The conviction is the result of an investigation into Weber's travel overseas to engage in sex with children.

Pursuant to the terms of his plea, Mr. Weber has agreed that his prior conviction involving the sexual abuse of a minor under Oregon state law constitutes a conviction "relating to the sexual exploitation of children," as outlined in 18 U.S.C. Section 2251(e). As a result, Weber faces a mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years in prison as an offender with a prior conviction relating to the sexual exploitation of children. Sentencing is scheduled for July 6, 2005.

The information to which Weber pleaded guilty charges that between Jan. 1, 2004 and June 1, 2004, Weber, having been previously convicted of an offense in the State of Oregon relating to the sexual exploitation of children, enticed a minor under the age of 12, a citizen of Kenya, to engage in sexually explicit conduct outside the United States for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct, and that Weber then transported the visual depiction to the United States. During his plea, Weber admitted he developed a relationship with, and ultimately married, a woman in Kenya who had two small children. During the charged time frame, Weber stated he communicated by e-mail with the mother and the minor about engaging in sexual activity during his visit, and traveled to Kenya where he engaged in sexual acts with the 10-year-old minor and produced video and still images of his abuse, and then transported those materials back to the United States.

Weber had been indicted on Feb. 17, 2005 of seven counts relating to international travel to engage in sexual acts with a minor, and the transport and possession of child pornography. In exchange for his plea and agreement to a term of imprisonment of 25 years, the counts in the existing indictment were dismissed by the United States.

In January 2004, ICE agents from Portland traveled to Nairobi, where, working closely with the Kenyan National Police, they conducted several interviews and served a search warrant as part of the investigation.

The charges, which specifically addresses the international production of child pornography and the transportation of those images to the United States, are being brought under the provisions of the recently enacted PROTECT Act, which substantially strengthened federal laws against predatory crimes and others which involve the exploitation of children.

“The innocent child victims of rape and sexual exploitation worldwide must know that they have a voice in court through the U.S. Department of Justice,” said Assistant Attorney General Christopher A. Wray. “We have an unwavering commitment to justice for these young victims. Through vigorous investigations and prosecutions, we will do everything in our power to stop the abhorrent practice of traveling overseas to engage in sex with minors.”

U.S. Attorney Karin J. Immergut added, “The capture and prosecution of those who prey on children is a top priority of my office. We will continue to work cooperatively with law enforcement agencies locally, nationally and internationally to bring sexual predators to justice.”

“Those who engage in the sexual exploitation of children should no longer expect distance or the anonymity of cyberspace to protect them,” said Leigh Winchell, Special Agent-in-Charge for ICE investigations in Oregon and Washington. “ICE is using all of its law enforcement authorities to combat this heinous behavior, both here and abroad.”

The Weber case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Gregory R. Nyhus of the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Oregon and Trial Attorney Steve Grocki of the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section at the U.S. Department of Justice. The case was investigated by Special Agent Dan Baldridge and others of the Portland Office of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement as part of ICE’s Operation Predator, a comprehensive initiative that targets those who exploit children.

In an unrelated sex tourism case, a 36-year-old resident of San Diego, California, pleaded guilty last week in the Southern District of California to a charge of traveling in foreign commerce with the intent to engage in illicit sexual conduct with a juvenile. At a court hearing, Bernard Lawrence Russell admitted that he traveled from San Diego, California in October 2002, with the intent to engage in a sexual act with a juvenile.

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